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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: NATO SECRETARY GENERAL VISITS CROATIA

Classified By: Poloff A.F.Godfrey for reasons 1.5 (b,d)

1. (C) In a brief visit to Zagreb on May 26, NATO Secretary General (SYG) Jaap de Hoop Scheffer "left a message of encouragement" for Croatia to move forward toward qualifying for an invitation to join the Alliance by making concrete progress in NATO's Membership Action Plan. In an outbrief to NATO Ambassadors, the SYG said he was impressed with the new government's commitment to continued reforms, but noted with concern that if President Mesic gets his way, Croatia will waste scarce defense resources in directions that do not support accession to NATO. In meetings with the President, PM, Foreign and Defense Ministers as well as at the Parliament, the SYG urged full cooperation with the ICTY and greater efforts to apprehend fugitive Ante Gotovina. The SYG discussed the security environment in the region with the PM and was pessimistic about prospects for finding a long-term solution in Kosovo. End Summary.

A Tour of MAP Countries Before Istanbul

2. (C) On May 26, NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer visited Croatia and met with the President, Prime Minister, Foreign and Defense Ministers and the Speaker of the Parliament. In a briefing to NATO Ambassadors accredited to Croatia, the SYG said the Zagreb visit was the first stop in a trip to all three of NATO's MAP countries. After visiting Skopje and Tirana, the SYG said he will attend a meeting of the North Atlantic Council at SFOR headquarters in Sarajevo. The SYG said he was considering adding a stop in Belgrade to the trip, but no plans have been made so far.

Croatia Wants a Fast Track To Membership

3. (C) The SYG said that one of the main reasons he scheduled this pre-Summit trip to the three MAP countries was to "leave a sign of encouragement" as the Istanbul Summit approaches. He was impressed with Croatia's declared commitment to continue the reforms needed to qualify for membership. The SYG said that PM Sanader was optimistic about Croatia's chances to enter the Alliance. Sanader said Croatia has its NATO bid on a "parallel track" with its EU application; he said that Croatia aspires to "catch the EU train and arrive in the same car" as Bulgaria and Romania. Sanader sought advice from the SYG on how to work with the other MAP countries; whether Croatia can expect to accede to membership on its own or if its fate is tied to Albania and Macedonia. The SYG said that candidates will be assessed on an individual basis, but in the meeting with NATO Ambassadors pointed out that while NATO and the EU have always talked about individual assessments, when it comes to enlargement, "they act in big bangs." The SYG said that none of his interlocutors expected an invitation for Croatia at Istanbul.

Cooperation On War Crimes

4. (C) The SYG discussed cooperation with ICTY in all of his meetings with officials in Zagreb, and made this point particularly clear during his address to the Croatian parliament. In meetings with the PM and FM, the SYG was told that Croatia expects ICTY Chief Prosecutor Carla del Ponte's upcoming report to the UNSC to be consistent with the "full cooperation" assessment she gave to the European Commission which led to the EC's positive "avis" on Croatia's EU membership application. The SYG characterized both the PM and FM as very optimistic about del Ponte's upcoming report. Croatia does, however, expect some criticism inasmuch as it is not yet fully ready to accept war crimes cases from ICTY for trial by Croatian courts. Sanader told the SYG that he understands how important the label of "full cooperation" is to NATO; the SYG said he "got the impression that he is sincere." During the SYG's outbrief, the Ambassador stated plainly that the USG will not base its judgment solely on del Ponte's assessment of Croatia's cooperation; for us it essential that the GoC apprehend ICTY fugitive Gotovina and transfer him to ICTY custody. The Ambassador said that the Croatian government is well aware that we consider Gotovina's fugitive status as an obstacle to Croatia's progress towards membership.

President Pulling Croatia Off-Track on Defense Reform?

15. (C) The SYG said that he was struck by the difference in how the government and President view Croatia's priorities for defense reform. He was briefed in meetings with the Defense and Foreign Ministers about the ongoing Strategic Defense Review and about discussions on force restructuring. He was pleased that the government is working to create a

flexible, modern force with capabilities that NATO can use. In his meeting with President Mesic, however, the SYG heard about plans to spend scarce defense resources to refit Croatia's fighter force, which demonstrates either a disregard for or a lack of understanding of NATO's priorities. The SYG said this internal conflict is common in transition countries, but Sanader and his cabinet will be challenged to bring the President's archaic vision of the armed forces around. The structure of Croatia's government does not help, the SYG continued. A simple question like "who is the commander-in-chief" prompts a long discussion. It is still not clear, the SYG said, whether PM Sanader or President Mesic will occupy the one chair allotted to Croatia at the EAPC meeting in Istanbul.

Regional Relations -- Concern About Serbia, Kosovo

16. (C) The SYG discussed relations in the region with Sanader and FM Zuzul at some length. He reported that Sanader was committed to improving relations with neighbors, but was concerned about developments in Serbia. Sanader said that he had extended the policy of allowing citizens of SaM visa-free travel to Croatia and described ongoing high-level contacts with government officials in SaM and hoped that these trends would continue. Sanader expressed concern about political developments in Belgrade, particularly about the strength of the Serb Radical Party, which he said has as part of its party doctrine a goal of re-annexing Croatian territory. Should the Serb Radical Party candidate win in June 13 Presidential elections, it would complicate a wide range of issues, including in Kosovo and Republika Srpska, Sanader told the SYG.

17. (C) The SYG told NATO Ambassadors he had no answers for Sanader on how the international community should proceed on Kosovo. He spoke bluntly, in very pessimistic terms, to NATO Ambassadors about the situation in Kosovo, and said he is "not confident" in the current plan; "it is difficult to talk about 'Standards before Status' when there are no standards."

Strong Words for Parliament

18. (C) In addition to ICTY cooperation, the SYG used his speech to the Croatian parliament to press for continued efforts on refugee return, judicial reform and defense reform. He pressed legislators to continue to approve the necessary budget support to modernize Croatia's defense forces. He also highlighted that the two-thirds majority vote in parliament required before deploying troops abroad would restrict Croatia's ability to respond to a rapid NATO deployment.

Public Support for NATO Falling

19. (C) The SYG said he had discussed the drop in public support for NATO in several of his meetings with GoC officials. The GoC recognized the challenge, but pointed out that the public has firmly associated NATO with U.S. policy and Iraq. The Ambassador concurred that the Croatian public did not understand the broad goals of NATO and challenged his ambassadorial colleagues in Zagreb to be more active in explaining publicly the benefits of membership in the Alliance. The German Ambassador said that two other factors added to the drop in public support. The first is that the security environment in the region has changed; Croatians no longer feel an imminent military threat. The second is less tangible; many Croatians are tired of being lectured to, he said. We should make it plain in our public statements that the Alliance wants Croatia to succeed and that NATO will benefit from Croatia's membership.

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